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ABSTRACT

Teachers of a basic writing course broadened their theme approach from growth and change in adolescence to the theme of language and identity, developed sequenced writing assignments, and worked toward the culminating unit--a mini-research project through which all the language and thinking skills developed throughout the semester could be integrated. Preliminary activities were designed to train students to look more closely at observing and perceiving as the basis of thinking and composing. The capstone of the course was the mini-research project through which students were invited to engage actively in academic scholarship. Students were instructed in the six stages of the research project: (1) choosing a topic; (2) summary writing; (3) interviewing; (4) interpreting and integrating findings; (5) the writing stage; and (6) oral presentations and "publication" of the research papers. Basic writing students engaged in authentic inquiry and succeeded in presenting themselves as the readers, writers and thinkers that before they thought only others could be. (Appendixes include writing assignments, timetables, and interview worksheets.) (RS)

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BASIC WRITERS AS CRITICAL THINKERS

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Over the past semesters we have been composing our basic writing curriculum to find ways of connecting our beliefs in our students' potential as critical thinkers with the kinds of learning and writing opportunities that could empower our students to achieve and help them "transform the roles they play" (Bartholomae 15) in academia.

We have tried to learn from researchers and theorists who, like us, believe that students' legacies and language must first be affirmed and accepted so that we could tap into their experiences and cognitive schema to instruct, nudge, and develop their abilities. Within our classrooms, we have tried to build an interactive environment where writing, reading, speaking, listening, thinking can be practiced together, and where we can open students' minds to new ways of perceiving themselves and thinking about the world around them.

From William Perry we have learned we can help lead students from a dualist, egocentric stage of rigid thinking toward a more enlightened stage of commitment through relativism where they could deal with ambiguities, and think more deeply about their own thinking.

We have learned from Mina Shaughnessy that our students are trying to make sense of their worlds, even as they err and that they need to be able to take risks within a supportive atmosphere.

We have learned from Lev Vygotsky about the importance

of the context of socialization in the development and integration of language and thought. He taught us how important it is for instruction to march slightly ahead of development.

We have learned from James Moffett and David Bartholomae that we can sequence writing assignments to help our students step up the ladder of abstraction from writing personal narratives to building theories and doing research.

We have learned from Harvey Wiener that in sequencing assignments we should think carefully about integrating and reinforcing all language skills, breaking down the process, asking carefully formulated questions, and enabling our students to do meaningful field study projects.

We have learned from Mike Rose and Andrea Lunsford that basic writers must be instructed to exercise their faculties of generalizing, inferring, and synthesizing. They must not be held back from doing high level college work, but rather must be given strategies to develop their cognitive skills, to learn to decenter by going beyond writing personal narratives only.

This past semester we wove a curriculum design that incorporated some activities and strategies to compel our students to become more conscious of their own abstraction process and to learn new habits of inquiry. We broadened our theme approach (adapted from Bartholomae) from growth and change in adolescence to the theme of language and identity, we developed sequenced assignments, and we worked toward a

culminating unit--the mini research project--through which we hoped all the language and thinking skills could be integrated, and where we expected our students to perform effectively as insiders in the academic community.

We would like to describe briefly some of the preliminary activities and thinking processess in which our students engaged, and then focus on presenting the research project and critical thinking components involved.

We began with Naming as a way to get students to talk with each other (and model the interview process), to be authorities on a subject, but also to try to get them to look at the familiar in a new way, to understand their own mental sets and hopefully to begin to broaden their perspectives. We wanted our students to see that names, the building blocks of language, are representations and should not be thought of as synonymous with personalities, with things. For this unit we modeled questions, had students interview each other, and write an essay on the history or significance of their names. (see Appendix A)

We built on the naming and labeling process as we moved on to train students to look more closely at observing and perceiving as a basis of thinking and composing. We invited students to become more astute observers. As an in-class and at home activity we asked them to "live" with an organic, edible fruit or vegetable and to keep an observer's double-entry journal, noticing first the object's physical characteristics and then its changes (adapted from Ann

Berthoff). Bringing to this assignment information from their own experience, students began to tap the experiences of their classmates as they compared objects and pooled their knowledge about the nature and/or uses of the object. This exercise further emphasized the importance of naming, close observation and of exact language. Our students were expectedto particularize their own objects. No longer were they able to say the object was big or small or had spots; the kiwi, for example, could be described by its specific dimensions,or in comparison with another object. We tried to extend their awareness by asking them to group objects together in categories. In their speaking and writing, students began to generalize about their objects and consider the differences between describing and generalizing.

Next, we asked students to examine closely and describe in detail different photos, art reproductions and magazine pictures, using what they had learned about their observing and perceiving processes. They became more sensitive perceivers, making lists of what they saw, "reading" the pictures in great detail, differentiating between their descriptions and inferences, fact and opinion. They began to generalize the idea of thesis and development in relation to pictures. Many of our students understood for the first time the meaning of these concepts, and were then able to apply them to their own essays.

Along with these activities, our students were reading different kinds of texts: "The Blind Man and the Elephant,"

essays such as "Looking at a Fish," stories such as Updike's "A &P," and other longer readings, such as Catcher in the Rye. They were also writing assigned, carefully sequenced essays which required naming, observing, perceiving, defining, and inferring. (see Appendices B-E)

The capstone of our reading, writing, speaking, listening, thinking course was the mini-research project through which we invited students to change the roles they could play as readers and writers by actively engaging in academic scholarship. Mike Rose has said, " We need a demanding curriculum that encourages the full play of language activity and that opens out onto the academic community rather than sequestering students from it" (358). We believe the mini research project does empower our students as writers and thinkers.

Since most of our students had never written a research paper before,they needed a great deal of support from their peers and us as their intstructors. We developed a framework, proceeded slowly through the process, and intervened at every stage, while continuing to communicate our high expectations.

The framework was as follows:

1. Students would have four weeks to research a topic, write a paper, and make an oral presentation of their findings. (see Appendix F)
2. The paper would incorporate and integrate library research plus one or two interviews with people who had some experience with their subject. Students would also

show evidence of their own thinking on the topic. Each of the stages of the process was modeled,demonstrated and worked through in part in class. As the instructors, we tried to do the project, so we could be alert and sensitive to problem areas.

We would like to describe the six stages, and review some of the critical thinking skills demonstrated at each stage.

Stage one-- choosing a topic--Here we set up a scaffold or support system to ensure our students' success.

a) First, encouraging our students to consider subjects of personal interest to them, we asked students to brainstorm topics which we listed on the board. Some examples of topics chosen were: racism on college campuses, the effect of divorce on teengagers, causes of child abuse and Perestroika.

b) After they found their own topics, students spent some time freewriting to release their own thinking and associations about their subjects. In this way they could relate their own knowledge base and background to the new information they would find.

c) They were also asked to formulate a few preliminary research questions pertaining to their chosen topics.

d) The class went to the library as a group for an orientation session, and for collection of material. Because we had provided the librarian beforehand with the research

topics and student interests, the orientation had purpose, the librarian was helpful, and the students were interested and attentive. We invited our students to use the Reader's Guide, to use the microfiche and to make copies of their articles. Many of our students had never used the library in this way before.

At this stage some critical thinking components involved asking higher order questions, categorizing, selecting, and making inferences about the appropriateness of the articles chosen from the Reader's Guide.

Stage 2 -- summary writing-- We wanted to make sure that our students could write summaries, and that they knew the difference between a summary and an opinion statement.

a) In class we all read and took notes on an assigned article.

b) Then students decided on a one sentence generalization. They compared their ideas, evaluated their choices and selected the most effective sentences. We tried to help students distinguish among the levels of abstraction needed to support their one sentence generalization.

c) After writing their own summaries, students examined them collaboratively, and chose the best ones to serve as models.

d) For the next class, students brought in a summary of an article collected for their research, and in small groups they evaluated the summaries according to the standards we

had set in the previous class.

At this stage the critical thinking components involved were: distinguishing between description and generalization, and between facts, inferences, and opinions.

Stage 3--The interview-- We wanted to make sure that the students were prepared so that they could conduct their interviews efficiently and professionally, and that they could get the most helpful information about their topics.

a) First, we prepared for the interview by discussing interviewing techniques, by role playing, and by having students write down key questions. Sometimes the kinds of questions depended on the information gained in their reading. Often they needed to fill in gaps in their knowledge, and/or clarify ideas.

b) We shared ideas about whom to interview in order to get the best information. In some cases suggestions were made about faculty, or other on-campus experts. One student interviewed a freshman from Japan in order to find out more about the Japanese school system; another student interviewed a natural science professor in order to find out more about nuclear power. As most of our students are commuters, having them make on-campus connections proved valuable and offered them additional paraticipation in the academic communmity.

c) Students conducted interviews, and then brought notes to class.

At this stage some critical thinking components involved

learning to suspend judgement while looking for evidence and alternative perspectives from interviewees, making critical assessments of the information they already had, surveying information and making judgments about what they didn't know, and also gathering supporting data to back up others' opinions.

Stage 4 -- Interpreting and integrating findings -- We wanted to make sure that students understood how to begin analyzing their data.

a) We created a worksheet that students filled out to help them see patterns and/or divisions in the material they had collected. Some used charts to compare and contrast information from summaries, interviews and their own opinions about their topics. (see Appendix G)

b) They got together in small groups to discuss their organization problems, help each other sift through their information, and select the relevant data.

c) Next, they had to formulate a tentative propositon statement based on the information they had gathered, selected and analyzed.

d) All students began a rough draft after they had done some preliminary free writing and/or outlining.

At this stage the critical thinking components involved were: deciding what material to include, comparing and contrasting, and evaluating.

Stage 5 --The Writing Stage -- Drafting, Revising, Editing-Students worked on their drafts in small groups. Often students read problematic parts of their drafts out loud, discussing different strategies for handling their information, getting feedback and using the critical judgment of their peers to shape and refine their drafts. Rhetorical concerns began to surface here. For instance, finding the right lead seemed to be a problem for many students. Demonstrations helped students find new ways to begin. We, the instructors, read from our drafts, discussing our own solutions to certain problems. In one instance, an anecdote about a neighbor's son became a more effective introduction for a paper on "The Perils of Adolescent Angst." One student, influenced by Updike's storytelling techniques in "A&P," began her paper about the effects of TV violence on children with a lively action scene.

After the revision process was completed and students were more or less satisfied with their drafts, as a class we turned our attention to editing concerns. Together, we created an editing checklist and identified student-editor experts who could help with spelling and grammar concerns.

At this stage some critical thinking components involved organizing, synthesizing and evaluating. In drafting and revising their work, students learned to move back and forth between the general and particular, supporting and qualifying their generalizations.

Stage 6 -- Oral presentations and celebration of published papers-- Students were required to present the results of their research to the rest of the class. They were asked to speak from notecards or outlines instead of just reading their papers. Although the first one or two presenters were tentative, students quickly realized the power of their positions and marched assertively to the front of the classroom. They were all extremely serious about the task. As an audience they listened actively to each speaker, and consequently, lively question-and-answer periods followed the individual presentations. Students filled out forms evaluating their peers' presentations.

At this stage some critical thinking components involved students analyzing their papers, deciding the most important ideas to present to the class and evaluating peer performance.

We have attempted through this curriculum and through the theme "language and identity" to help our students develop a new level of cognitive maturity. In evaluating our course, our students have pointed to the research project as a meaningful learning experience both cognitively and affectively. They wrote that they learned how to organize ideas and gained confidence in their ability to achieve. Our students have enlarged their perspectives about their own topics as well as those of their peers, have been able to distinguish facts from opinions, descriptions from generalizations, and have gone beyond either-or opinions

related to an issue. They have engaged in authentic inquiry, have learned they could control ideas in a meaningful way, and have succeeded in presenting themselves as the readers/writers/thinkers that before they thought only others could be.

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Appendix A

Interview--Ice Breaker

Focus: Using Language Constructively

Purposes: Learning to use own and others' knowledge and experience; gaining insights into naming; sharpening listening skills; enlarging perspectives(cultural etc.)

Instructions:

1. Take a few minutes to write notes about your name, using the following questions as a guide. What is most important for you about your name?
2. Pair up, introduce yourself to your partner and interview each other about your names. Take notes on his/her answers to the following questions.
3. Introduce your partner to the class, telling what you learned about his/her name and its history.
4. Write a short summary about what you learned regarding names and their significance from your interview and from others that you heard.

Questions:

1. What is your <u>complete</u> name?
2. Do you have any other names? (family? religious?)
3. Do you have a nickname? Are there any stories behind your name? Tell one if you can?
4. Has your name ever been changed? (has anyone in your family changed a last?first? or middle name?)
5. What language is your family name? Do you know what it means? Explain as much as you can?
6. Why was your name chosen?
7. How do you feel about your name? What is it really like to have your name instead of another?
8. Have you wished to change your name? If you could change it , what would you change it to? Why?
9. Have you ever met or heard of someone with the same name? How would you feel and/or respond if you did?
10. Make up your own question to ask. (Write it down.)

Appendix B

Writing Assignment #2

1. Write a short essay about this object based on your journal entries. What was the most significant finding for you about this object, and/or your changing feelings toward it. Try to let your classmates, who will be reading this paper, know why this was significant.

Or, describe your experience with this object during the last week. What made it special or different for you?

2. Describe a significant experience you have recently had with your own special possession. Try to observe the object as closely as possible, applying the techniques you learned from your week's observations. Explain why this object is so special for you, and not necessarily for anyone else.

Appendix C

Writing Assignment #3

1. Write an essay in which you describe a special object, place or person. Try to create a dominant impression about what was most significant about object, place or person described. Try to explain differences beween sensing, seeing, perceiving, inferring in relation to your choice.

2. Write about an experience you had in which your well-being depended on your ability to observe clearly.(a dangerous situation, a sport, a life decision) Describe the situation and explain the significance of your observation, or perceptions etc.

3. Write about an experience you had recently in which you saw or perceived something differently from soneone else. Describe the experience and explain how you saw it, how someone else saw it and why the difference was significant.

Appendix D

Writing Assignment #4

1. Write a dialog between two people with different points of view who see differently. eg.mother and teen--subject, teen's bedroom, boy and boss--subject, discrepancy in cash register.

2. Write two paragraphs describing a scene from two different points of view. Use dialog. for eg. an accident seen by victim, policeman, news reporter, bystander-- or, street scene viewed by two lovers, a pickpocket, a lonely old man.

3. Write about how a significant decision you made or how a significant experience you had has changed you or your perception of reality. Some ideas: living through a natural disaster, a car accident, quitting a job, going to college, a death of someone close etc. Include your expectations, description of incident, changes in you as a result.

Appendix E

Writing Assignment # 7

Choose one of the topics, and write a draft of at least two pages.

1. Choose a term applied to you, or that you applied to someone else. Describe the meaning of the term and its significance for you. Some egs. "lazy," "wimp," "champ," "weird-o" etc.

2. Give your extended definition of a word that is important to you, and explain its meaning through your own experience, illustration, concrete examples etc. Some egs., family, success, love --

3. Write about how you changed your thinking about the meaning of a word. How did you think about it before, why did your thinking change, how do you think about it now. Some egs. success, freedom, happiness, education etc.

Appendix F

RESEARCH PAPER TIMETABLE

11/7 - Topic selection and tentative thesis

11/9 - Library orientation - do not leave the library until you have a copy of at least one article. Two articles on your topic will be required for this paper.

11/14 - Copies of research articles brought to class

11/16 - Summaries of two articles due; formulating interview questions in class

11/18 - Interview notes due

11/23 - Rough draft of research paper due - typed, double-spaced

12/2 - Final draft due

12/5 - Oral presentations

Appendix G

Field Report Worksheet

Use this sheet and separate interview sheet to help you with organizing the interview and incorporating the findings with other research.

I. List your 4-6 key questions(see guide)

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

II. Describe some of the important points person made about topic.

1.

2.

3.

4.

III. List 2-4 quotations that you think are particularly important.

1.

2.

3.

4.